

QUALIFIED SUCCESS

Gamboa Shines, Juanma Exposed, Mtagwa Steals The Show

By Don Stradley

Seated in the packed WAMU Theater at Madison Square Garden, his face lit by the glow of multi-colored lights swirling above the action, promoter Bob Arum looked like a man trying to stay calm while taking a polygraph test. He turned his waxen face towards the arena's clock. Then he turned his attention back to the ring, where Juan Manuel Lopez and Rogers Mtagwa were wading through the final seconds of what had been a brutal encounter.

Arum had been the proverbial lion in winter all evening, at one point announcing to press row that he had "the first Hispanic heavyweight champion" in Odlanier Solis, a

270-pound lard ass who'd just kayoed knockout-victim-for-hire Monte Barrett. That Barrett has a history of knockout losses and had taken the fight on short notice meant little to Arum, for he revels in his stable of Hispanic fighters the way Howard Stern revels in strippers: They are the keys to his fortune. But during the final minutes of

While undefeated Cuban Yuriorkis Gamboa looked outstanding stopping Whyber Garcia in the fourth round (opposite page), Puerto Rican hotshot Juan Manuel Marquez was badly hurt late in his fight and was lucky to finish on his feet (below), as unheralded Rogers Mtagwa stole the show with an inspired, albeit losing, performance.

PHOTOS BY ED MULHOLLAND



"Island Warriors: Latin Fury 12," the most recent of Top Rank's modestly budgeted Latin-themed pay-per-view shows, Arum looked ready to bust.

Puerto Rico's Lopez, 121, Arum's latest ethnic hero, was being pushed to the limit by Mtagwa, 121, a journeyman who, like Barrett, was hired to be a willing accessory in building another Top Rank star. At best, Mtagwa was supposed to give Lopez four or five rounds of brisk action before capitulating. Instead, he was smashing Lopez in the face with right hands, and was on the verge of knocking Lopez out. For the 3,152 in attendance, watching Lopez totter around the ring during the 12th was like watching a drunk, blindfolded man coming perilously close to an open elevator shaft, only to lurch away at the last moment. Perhaps it was the sort of baptism under fire that all fighters need, but as far as Arum was concerned, Lopez could have done with much less fire. When it was over, the judges voted

for Lopez, and the color returned to Arum's face.

Judges Steve Weisfeld, Carlos Ortiz, and Kevin Morgan turned in scorecards reading 115-111, 116-111, and 114-113, respectively, all for Lopez, who retained his WBO 122-pound title. THE RING had it even, 113-113, scoring the final round 10-8 for Mtagwa. (There could be some argument that the opening round could've been 10-8 for Lopez, since he appeared to score two flash knockdowns, only to see them ruled as slips by referee Eddie Cotton.)

Although the verdict was greeted by some jeers, and a few in the press row grumbled (perhaps because they were denied a chance to write about the upset of the year), the decision was not an outright travesty. Lopez had done well during the early rounds, scored a fluky knockdown in the fifth, and even during the rounds where Mtagwa pasted him, Lopez landed often enough to stay competitive. Nevertheless, while Lopez

won the decision, he didn't win the fight. His lumpy face was proof of that.

"I thought Lopez fought a stupid fight," Arum told the press later. Still, Arum went into a full-tilt sales pitch, describing Lopez' golden future on the world's greatest network, "HBO," a remark that hung in the air like a dissonant note since the commentator duties for "Latin Fury 12" were handled by Showtime's Steve Farhood and Al Bernstein. If Arum seemed feisty, it's only because he's invested so much in Lopez.

Arum hopes to match Lopez, 27-0 (24), with Yuriorkis Gamboa, 17-0 (15), the sinewy Cuban featherweight who fought in the co-main event, stopping Whyber Garcia in four rounds. In fact, many of us want Lopez-Gamboa, for it's a rare and wonderful thing when two young, promising fighters of similar size emerge at the same time and appear destined to meet. That feeling was in the air three decades ago when Tommy Hearns and Ray Leonard were entering their prime

years, and more recently when Oscar De La Hoya and Felix Trinidad were young bucks. These match-ups don't always live up to expectations: Hearns and Leonard gave us a rivalry for the ages; Trinidad and De La Hoya didn't. It's not that Gamboa and Lopez will ever be as famous or accomplished as the aforementioned foursome, but it's enticing to have a couple of young fighters like them sharpening their skills and maturing before our eyes.

The possibility of Gamboa-Lopez is no less appealing after the near disaster of "Latin Fury 12," though our impressions have changed a bit. It was originally thought that Gamboa was the raw, off-balance fighter, with Lopez being the sharpshooter who would probably outclass him. Now, with Gamboa looking lightning quick against Garcia, and Lopez looking well off his game against Mtagwa, we're beginning to wonder if it's Lopez rather than Gamboa who has a lot more to learn. For instance

Just Because You're Fighting, A Brawler Doesn't Mean You Have To Brawl

By the fifth round it was apparent to everyone in the arena, except for the fine folks in Lopez' corner, that Mtagwa was gradually turning the fight his way. But rather than using his jab and a little movement, Lopez continued to trade with the hardheaded Mtagwa. This resulted in Lopez being badly hurt in the 10th, nearly knocked through the ropes and saved by the bell ending the 11th, and wobbly for most of the 12th. We're not suggesting he should've turned totally defensive and run for an entire round, but had he mixed some boxing with his attack, he might have gone back to Caguas looking a little less like George Chuvalo.

Just Because You Have A Good Chin Doesn't Mean You Have To Take So Many Shots

Hit the average guy in the face 20 times with overhand rights, and he'll eventually put his hands up to block, especially when it's coming from someone like Mtagwa, who not only telegraphs his punches, but practically sends an e-mail to let you know another right hand is coming. Not Lopez, though.

The Tanzanian Rocky

Rogers Mtagwa, 25-13-2 (18), has had the sort of career that Glen Johnson has had: lots of close losses on the road, some bad breaks, and a general lack of acknowledgment from fans. Johnson, though, went on to win a championship and earn some good paydays. J Russell Peltz believes Mtagwa can do the same.

"Rogers is only 30," Peltz told THE RING. "He reminds me of Dick Tiger and some other African fighters, he's getting better as he gets older. Lopez said Gamboa should fight Mtagwa next, and we'd be all for that, anyone from 122 to 126."

According to Peltz, Mtagwa wasn't too upset by the judges' decision. "Rogers doesn't get too high or too low," Peltz said. But three days after "Latin Fury 12," Peltz was still brooding.

"The WBO should mandate an immediate rematch. There was so much wrong in that fight, a bogus knockdown in the fifth, bogus judging. What happened to the rule that a fighter who is supported by the ropes is considered knocked down? Lopez was saved by the ropes at least twice, maybe more. I have to look at the fight again, but I know Rogers won. I like Eddie Cotton, but he had a bad night. He would've stopped the fight if Rogers was staggering around like Lopez."

"I just don't get Bob Arum. He has made more money than he'll ever spend, so why can't he do the right thing? We could put the rematch in Roberto Clemente Stadium in Puerto Rico and sell it out. How can they just forget about this in a week or two?"

Peltz couldn't even take solace in knowing Mtagwa came out of this fight with his reputation enhanced, saying, "It wasn't on HBO, so how many people actually saw it?"

Those who tuned in may have seen Mtagwa's arrival as a force at junior featherweight. Either that, or "Latin Fury 12" will be remembered as the night a fighter with a dozen losses came within one punch of the big time, only to never be seen again.

—D.S.

Mtagwa would gladly fight Gamboa next



Lopez got off to a good start, banging home plenty of clean shots, but Mtagwa has a great chin and withstood "Juanma's" early surge and rallied down the stretch, coming very close to scoring a huge upset.

PHOTO BY ED MULHOLLAND

PHOTO BY CHRIS FARINATOP-RANK

There were clubfighters all over America that night who weren't getting hit as often as Lopez. On the plus side, we learned Lopez can take a punch, but could he take the same shots from Gamboa?

Just Because You Can Punch Doesn't Mean You'll Knock Everybody Out

Prior to the bout, Lopez had said of Mtagwa, "He's a little awkward, and I have been practicing stepping back a little bit." That sounded good, but once Mtagwa decided to drag Lopez into a street fight, "Juanma" forgot about anything he worked on in the gym and chose to exchange punches. Lopez, whose power never let him down before, grew arm weary trying to slow Mtagwa down.

Still, there's another way of looking at Lopez' ragged win, as Farhood told THE RING via e-mail, "It's easy to be overly critical of Lopez regarding his performance against Mtagwa, but instead of focusing on how much he got hit, I'm thinking about how much he landed without visible results. I believe Lopez to be a huge puncher, but Mtagwa has a great chin. Should Lopez face Gamboa, who's to say whether the Cuban will be able to withstand the type of punishment Lopez dished out at the Garden?"

Lopez will also be moving up from junior featherweight to featherweight, which might improve his stamina. He'll also be more aware of what Gamboa brings to a fight, which leads us to another lesson Lopez should learn ...

Just Because You're Being Groomed As The Next Big Thing Doesn't Mean You Can Take Opponents Lightly

Lopez' willingness to slug may have stemmed from the lack of respect he had for Mtagwa. There was a moment in the fight, after the bell ending a middle round, when Lopez sneered at Mtagwa with obvious disdain. It was the look a snotty debutant gives to an ugly girl who has crashed her party. Lopez' attitude was, *How dare you come at me with your crazy headbutts and your rough style. Don't you realize I'm the new Felix Trinidad?*

Mtagwa either didn't know or didn't care. After taking several hard punches in the first round, you could see a change come over him in the second, as he imposed himself on Lopez with a stubborn exuberance. True, the judges scored the first six rounds for Lopez, but Mtagwa had found a doorway into the bout. He began hurling himself at Lopez, slashing at him with rights, and refusing to be intimidated. When Lopez tried to overwhelm him with combinations, Mtagwa simply charged in like a criminal elbowing past security. Mtagwa's dumb magic culminated in the final three rounds, which belonged to him alone.

The fighters' respective corners told the story after the bout: Mtagwa's corner was jubilant. Mtagwa's trainer, Bobby "Boogaloo" Watts, smiled broadly and shadowboxed, saying "Wow," as if he'd just witnessed the impossible. Lopez, who'd gone 12 rounds for the first time, was slumped on his stool, exhausted, a white towel over his head, his handlers huddled around him as if they were medics tending to an accident victim. Lopez later admitted Mtagwa gave him the toughest bout of his career, but he kept repeating that Mtagwa was dangerous only because he had nothing to lose.

"I have everything to lose, he had nothing to lose," said Lopez. "That's why this fight was difficult. From now on, I only want to fight real champions, not these fighters with nothing to lose."

Arum did give Mtagwa credit for his efforts, saying, "He stayed in there and didn't get discouraged, and at the end had Juanma reeling, so you have to give him props."

Mtagwa will have to be satisfied with props, for when the subject of a rematch was brought up, Arum said only that the verdict was in, Lopez won, a January bout in Puerto Rico awaits, to be followed by a possible showdown with Gamboa next year. Mtagwa isn't in the picture.

What Arum stopped short of saying is that Mtagwa is out of the running because he's not Hispanic. If a Mexican or Puerto Rican had given Lopez such a hairy experience, there certainly would be a rematch. But Mtagwa, a Tanzanian who fights out of Philadelphia, has about as much chance at a rematch with Lopez as Joshua Clottey has at getting Miguel Cotto again: none. Arum didn't even seem particularly happy that he'd promoted one of the best fights of the year, which under most circumstances would be followed by a sequel.

"The only thing on Arum's mind was that Lopez wasn't the hit in New York that he thought he'd be," said Mtagwa's Hall of Fame promoter, J Russell Peltz.

"Thirty-five years ago, every promoter in boxing would be bidding on the rematch. Now, everyone goes running to HBO first to see if they want it. I just don't get it. We can petition for it, but when does anything in boxing go right? Everyone is on the side of the guy with the undefeated record. Rogers gets no respect because he had 12 losses. They couldn't even put Rogers' picture on the posters." Peltz concluded by telling THE RING, "I'll live with round 12 for the rest of my life, just waiting for Rogers to score the knockout and get the storybook finish he deserved."

Unfortunately, the story is being controlled by Arum. For Arum, the Hispanic market is still intoxicating, and he would tell us we're nuts for harping on a rematch for Mtagwa. He'd tell us we don't know how the business works. After all, he's the millionaire promoter, not us. But we do know that this is an era where good fights are scarce, and we wonder if anyone can really afford to ignore something as compelling as Lopez-Mtagwa II. ■

Don Stradley, a regular contributor to THE RING, was ringside at the WAMU Theater for Lopez-Mtagwa.



Although Mtagwa often telegraphed his punches, he repeatedly tagged Lopez with hard shots, especially during the last three rounds. Sadly, Lopez' promoter, Bob Arum, refuses to consider giving Mtagwa a rematch.

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